

CommonCall: Strengthen ministry by strengthening marriage

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JUAREZ, Mexico—An initiative to strengthen ministers and their families in Juarez grew out of longstanding relationships a campus minister in Levelland developed with pastors in the Mexican border city.

Throughout the four decades Arlano Funderburk served as director of Baptist Student Ministries at South Plains College, he traveled to Mexico early each year to locate sites and make plans for a weeklong summer mission trip for students.

In 2006, he learned about two pastors in Juarez who recently had sustained fatal heart attacks.

“One of them happened while he was preaching on Sunday,” Funderburk said.

Most of the pastors in the area served bivocationally. Because many lacked health insurance, they avoided trips to the doctor unless they needed urgent care.

So, Funderburk proposed offering physical exams for the pastors and their spouses. With preventive care, he hoped pastors could then get ahead of a difficult situation before a condition turned fatal. As a follow-up, he invited the ministers and their spouses to a retreat.

Retreat benefits churches ministers serve



Arlano Funderburk

Proyecto Fortaleza/The Strengthening Project—an annual retreat for couples in ministry—took shape. The annual retreats focus on spiritual development and marriage enrichment.

“If we could strengthen the marriage, then I felt like we could also make a strong contribution to their churches as well,” Funderburk said.

The retreat not only benefits the 40 couples or so who participate, he noted. It also affects the lives of nearly 2,000 church members in the congregations those ministers and spouses serve.

For 13 years—even during the period of drug-cartel violence that briefly earned Juarez the title “murder capital of the world”—the retreats continued without interruption, he noted.

“And the response has been wonderful,” he added.

‘They chose to stay’

Brian Hill initially became involved with the Strengthening Project about 10 years ago, when he served churches in Littlefield and Levelland. Hill now is pastor of First Baptist Church in Corpus Christi and president of the Strengthening Project board of directors.



The Strengthening Project retreat allows pastors and spouses to engage in worship, spiritual development and marriage enrichment. (Photo courtesy of Arlano Funderburk)

Hill pointed to the impact violence in Juarez had on ministry there a decade ago. Many of the churches in the United States that had partnered with congregations in Juarez cancelled mission trips, and some ceased to provide ongoing financial support.

When congregations in metropolitan Juarez suffered, churches in towns surrounding the metropolitan area also paid the price, since it meant diminished resources for the Northern Chihuahua Regional Baptist Association, he added.

“I saw this as an opportunity not only to minister to pastors but to all of those who somewhat felt abandoned and alone,” Hill said. “They could’ve left, they could’ve gone into the interior away from the border and the violence, but they chose to stay. This is something that really humbles me, to think that I can be a part of helping with that.”

Ten years ago, the Strengthening Project offered a one-day retreat. It grew into a three-day experience.

For ministers and their spouses to attend the Strengthening Project retreat, they often must plan months in advance. Since most serve bivocationally, participation in the retreat means scheduling time off from secular employment—often without pay.

Open eyes to new ideas

Their willingness to plan ahead and make necessary adjustments shows how much they need what the retreat offers, Funderburk noted.

The Strengthening Project not only offers pastors and their spouses rest and fellowship, but also opens their eyes to new ministry ideas, he said.

“I’ve heard many stories about new ministries that churches provide because of the vision they have gotten here,” Funderburk said. He pointed specifically to churches that developed ministries to care for widows and children who were victims of violence.

Couples in ministry whose marriages suffered due to the pressures they faced also found new hope. Even some marriages that were on the brink of divorce flourished again after couples attended the retreat, Funderburk noted.

The Strengthening Project fills a void. While pastors may have the benefit of occasionally attending some conferences and training events, there is

little or nothing offered otherwise for spouses and couples ministry, Hill observed.

‘It is God’s gift’

The retreat can be costly, and the Strengthening Project operates as a not-for-profit organization on a tight budget. Often, the organization does not receive the funds it needs until after the retreat concludes and the bills come due, Funderburk noted.

However, the cost the organization pays pales in comparison to the price the ministers and their families pay, day in and day out, serving in a difficult place, Funderburk said. Following Jesus in Juarez comes at a price unfamiliar to most Christians in the United States, he noted.

The pressures they face can make them lose sight of their calling, but the Strengthening Project helps them find the focus they need, Hill said.

Serving alongside Funderburk and Hill on the Strengthening Project board are Dave Job, a retired pastor; Raquel Contreras, general director and publisher of Editorial Mundo Hispano/Baptist Spanish Publishing House, who serves as the organization’s secretary; and Zoricelis Davila, a Christian counselor and psychotherapist in Fort Worth, who serves as treasurer. Both Contreras and Davila also teach and facilitate sessions at the retreat.

“We do this and continue to do it because the value that we see in it,” Funderburk said. “We feel it is God’s gift, and we are just thankful to get to be a part, but he provides for this. And because we have seen what he is doing and what he has done, we are convinced this is worth our lives and the investment.”

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